

What happens to community-based preschool during school-based pre-k expansion?

A look at enrollment patterns



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Context

Beginning in 2013, the City of Chicago launched major policy efforts to promote more equitable enrollment in preschool programs.¹ The policies intended to increase enrollment among high-priority groups of students (students of color, those speaking a language other than English, and those living in neighborhoods with lower income and higher unemployment). To meet this goal, the City implemented several policy strategies including expanded preschool options through several approaches:

- increasing the number of full-day pre-k classrooms within Chicago Public School buildings,
- reallocating preschool classrooms in schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) throughout the city,
- making intentional decisions about the placement of full-day pre-k classrooms within neighborhoods with a larger proportion of age-eligible children and historically low rates of high-priority student enrollment,
- conducting targeted outreach and providing better information to parents, and
- creating a centralized application process to facilitate prioritized enrollment.

Policy changes were associated with increased access and enrollment

Initial research on these policy changes focused on understanding how the expansion and placement of full-day classrooms within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was associated with changes in access and enrollment among different student groups.² We examined data from students who were eligible to enroll in pre-k in the three years before the policy changes (2010-11 through 2012-13) to those eligible in the three years after policy changes (2013-14 through 2015-16). We found that access to full-day *school-based* pre-k increased for high-priority student groups in the three years after policy changes were implemented. Specifically, in the post-policy period, Black students, lowest-income students, and students living in mostly-Black neighborhoods were almost three times more likely to enroll in CPS full-day pre-k compared to the pre-policy period.

When sharing initial study findings with key community stakeholders, the study's authors heard concerns about the potential negative impact of CPS pre-k expansion on preschool-age programs provided by City-funded CBO preschool (CBO preschool). The intention of the CPS school-based pre-k expansion was to complement existing CBO preschool program options, thus adding to the overall supply of full-day preschool in Chicago. However, some community partners expressed concern that CPS may have instead provided services to children who otherwise would have been served by CBO preschool programs—supplanting, rather than expanding, the total supply. A comprehensive examination of enrollment patterns across both the CPS and CBO preschool classrooms during the years before and after the policy changes would support the city in achieving its goal of serving more age-eligible, high-priority students in a preschool program regardless of setting. This study takes a first look at these enrollment patterns. The present analysis explores this potential tradeoff by observing 4-year-old enrollment rates in CPS and CBO preschool programs during the pre- and post-policy periods.

¹ We use the term "preschool" as an umbrella term for all formalized early education programs available to 3- to 5-year-old children prior to kindergarten. When preschool is offered within a school setting, we use the more specific term "pre-k" most commonly used by districts.

² Ehrlich et al., 2020

Study Design

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To understand whether a shift occurred in CBO preschool enrollment of preschool-aged students during the same period we saw increases in CPS full-day pre-k enrollment, we ask: ***In the post-policy period, how did enrollment in CBO preschool programs change?*** We examine patterns of overall enrollment, enrollment in full-day preschool, and enrollment in half-day preschool in CBOs across Chicago.

SAMPLE

Our student sample included all students enrolled in CPS kindergarten from 2011-12 to 2016-17 (three years pre-policy and three years post-policy). We consider this to be the population of students who *might* have enrolled in public pre-k or preschool. The six cohorts range in size from roughly 28,500 to 33,800 students. We also used student-level administrative data from the City of Chicago Department of Family & Support Services (DFSS) and from CPS to identify who enrolled in pre-k the year prior to kindergarten.³

HOW WE MEASURED “ENROLLMENT”

CBO preschool enrollment. Using all the data files we received from DFSS, we counted how many students were ever enrolled in CBO preschool programs at any point in each of the six program years.⁴ The enrollment rates for CBO preschool programs is this enrollment number divided by the total number of CPS kindergarten students in the following school year. However, the data were not linked, so we do not know *which specific* students in the CPS kindergarten files were represented in the CBO preschool files.

CPS pre-k enrollment.⁵ For all students who were in kindergarten in a particular year, we examined

whether they had been enrolled the prior year in CPS for pre-k. In this case, data were linked through student ID numbers so we could identify the *specific* students who enrolled in CPS pre-k the prior year. Again, the rates calculated were the total number of students enrolled in CPS pre-k divided by the total number of kindergarten students in each cohort.

Note that we defined enrollment differently for the two groups of students. Although we could link CPS students from one year to the next, we could not do the same with CBO students because we lacked unique identifiers for them.

METHODS

In order to answer our research question, we looked descriptively at changes in enrollment rates in the three years before Chicago’s pre-k policy changes (2010-11 through 2012-13) and three years post-policy implementation (2013-14 through 2015-16). Using the enrollment measures described previously, we calculated the proportion of students in each kindergarten cohort that attended CPS pre-k in the prior year and the proportion that attended CBO preschool in the prior year.

A caution in interpreting findings: Because of the data limitations noted above, some students may be “double counted.” It is not possible to determine which students were enrolled in CBO preschool only, in CPS pre-k only, or in both. We suspect that some students were enrolled in CBO preschool *and* CPS pre-k programs and were thus counted in both categories in our dataset. We cannot determine the extent to which this was indeed the case, so total enrollment rates across all public preschool options (CBO preschool + CPS pre-k) derived from these data may be inflated. Because of this limitation, we do not report or interpret “total” enrollment and do not advise interpreting the sum of CBO and CPS enrollment rates.

³In Chicago, preschool funding streams cross settings. For example, Head Start is available in both CBOs and schools (in 2015–16, 6,278 Head Start four-year-olds were enrolled in CBOs while 5,119 were enrolled in CPS). Similarly, Illinois’s state-funded pre-k (Preschool for All) is available in both schools and CBOs. We include students regardless of funding stream.

⁴ Students may have started the year in one program and transferred to another, in which case they would be counted twice.
⁵ School-based CPS pre-k includes enrollment slots funded through a variety of mechanisms, including state pre-k, Head Start, family-paid tuition, and Child-Parent-Centers.

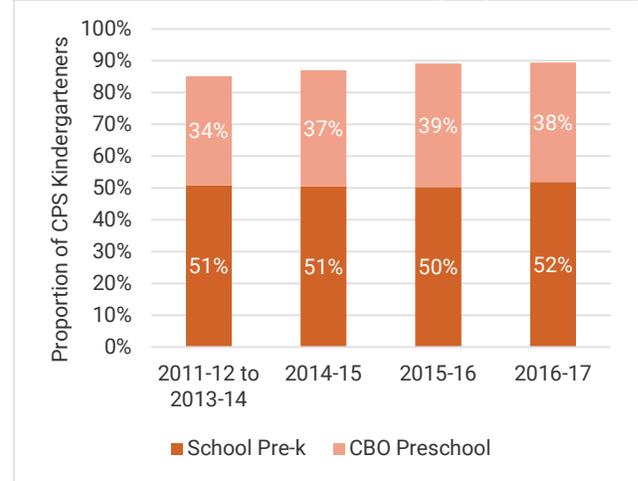
Exploring enrollment changes in school-based pre-k and CBO preschool over time

We first explore enrollment in any (half- or full-day) CBO preschool or CPS pre-k program, in order to observe changes over time including potential decreases in CBO preschool enrollment. We then look more specifically at full-day enrollment, because this was where our previous research saw large changes in access and enrollment among CPS pre-k students. Finally, we examine half-day enrollment in order to see if there were potential trade-offs between half- and full-day, with less enrollment in half-day programs over time as enrollment in full-day programs increased.

FINDING 1. OVERALL RATES OF ENROLLMENT IN BOTH CBO PRESCHOOL AND IN CPS-BASED PRE-K WERE RELATIVELY STABLE BEFORE AND AFTER POLICY CHANGES.

Figure 1 shows overall enrollment rates in any (half- or full-day) CPS pre-k program (dark blue) and in any CBO preschool program (light blue) of 4-year olds for each kindergarten cohort. In the three years before (combined in the left bar in the graph) and after Chicago's pre-k policy changes (shown year-by-year in the graph), enrollment rates in both CPS pre-k and CBO preschool was relatively stable across years. While Exhibit 1 shows slightly higher percentages of enrolled students in the later years, the overall kindergarten cohort numbers were declining, resulting in very similar enrollment numbers across the six years⁶.

Figure 1. Overall Enrollment in Any CPS Pre-k and CBO Preschool Increased Slightly Over Time



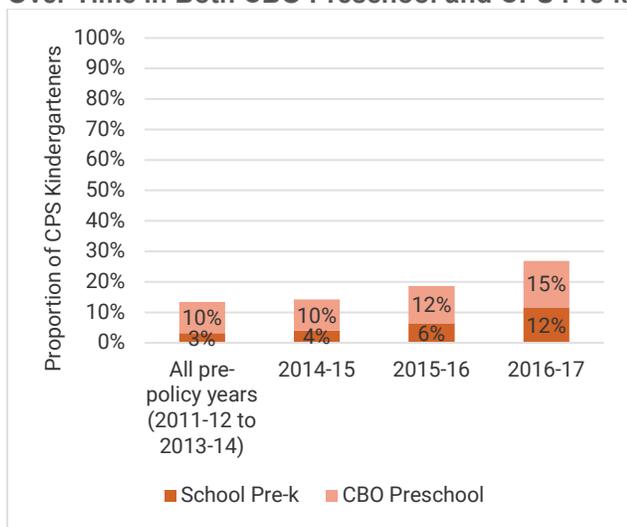
FINDING 2. ENROLLMENT IN FULL-DAY PRE-K INCREASED IN BOTH CBO PRESCHOOL AND CPS-BASED PRE-K.

The policy changes the City of Chicago implemented were specifically aimed at increasing full-day enrollment for high-priority students. As shown in Figure 2, we found:

- In the pre-policy years, students were much less likely to enroll in full-day CPS pre-k than in full-day preschool in CBO preschool programs (3% in CPS pre-k vs. 10% in CBO preschool).
- In the post-policy years, there were significant increases in full-day enrollment for both CPS pre-k and CBO preschool. School-based full-day pre-k enrollment increased from 3% to 12% over the study period; enrollment in CBO full-day preschool programs increased from 10% to 15%.
- By 2016-17, students were almost as likely to enroll in CPS for full-day pre-k as they were to enroll in a full-day CBO preschool program for pre-k.

⁶ See *Closer to Home: More Equitable Pre-K Access and Enrollment in Chicago*. Kindergarten enrollment ranged from 33,804 in 2012-13 to 28,537 in 2016-17.

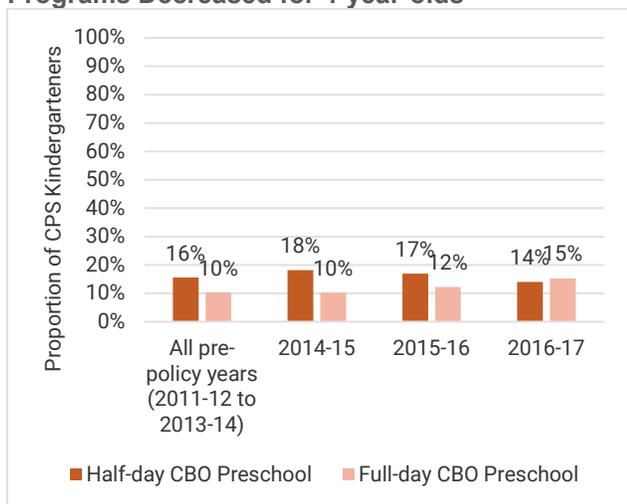
Figure 2. Enrollment in Full-Day Pre-K Increased Over Time in Both CBO Preschool and CPS Pre-k



FINDING 3. ENROLLMENT IN HALF-DAY CBO PRESCHOOL DECREASED.

As full-day enrollment was increasing in both CPS pre-k and CBO preschool programs, we wondered whether half-day enrollment patterns shifted. Figure 3 shows CBO preschool enrollment rates for 4-year-olds in the years pre- and post-policy change. CBO preschool enrollment in full-day programs increased while CBO preschool enrollment in half day programs decreased. Three years after the policy changes were implemented, CBO enrollment rates in half-day and full-day preschool programs were almost equal (14% and 15%, respectively), compared to 16% and 10% before the policy changes.

Figure 3. CBO Preschool Enrollment in Half-Day Programs Decreased for 4-year-olds



Implications

Between the 2010-11 and 2016-17 school years, full-day pre-k enrollment increased in both CPS pre-k and CBO preschool programs. While enrollment of high-priority children increased in CPS pre-k programs, there was also an increase in full-day CBO enrollment. Therefore, it does not seem that CPS expansion *took away* students from CBO programs, but rather that more families were served overall, and more students were enrolled in full-day programs in both CBO preschool and CPS school-based pre-k. The aim of the City’s pre-k expansion and policy efforts was met through enrollment of preschool-age students in both school-based and community-based programs, with more families being reached. Further work in this area may explore the geographic distribution of community-based seats (similar to our additional study reports, linked below), to determine whether this expansion met the goals of serving more high-priority families.

Related Study Reports

1. [Closer to Home: More Equitable Pre-K Access and Enrollment in Chicago](#)
2. [A Path to Equity: From Expanded Pre-kindergarten Access to Success in Elementary School](#)

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